

The Great Indian Kitchen: Serving of an Unpalatable Tale of Male Chauvinism in Home

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Abstract—The feminist movements played a vibrant role in enriching women for gaining self-sufficiency, which significantly influenced society. “With the advent of new feminist theories which reflects the varicoloured making of women’s cinema as the globalised society have adverse effects on women particularly in the developing countries” (Shalini & Alamelu, 2017). The opinions and visions of the movement are expressed through several works. They are also reflected in films as feminist films. The objective of feminist films is to portray the traditional and patriarchal society in which gender inequality, women’s subjectivity, toil and subjugation are expressed in varied forms. Mozghan Sadat Marandi expounds that, “Filmmakers have opportunities to question, however subtly, the roles and relations of women in society” (Marandi, 2011). The selected film for the present research, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), deals with traditional and patriarchal family notions and the never-ending tasks of women’s lives in the kitchen. The role played by the protagonist is confined to the kitchen doing her homely traditional duties as her family insisted on foregoing her desire for her career. *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) is a revolutionary movie made subtly to ensure that the audience empathises with the women’s experience in their families. The objective of the present research is to analyse the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) through the lens of liberal feminism.

Index Terms—feminism, traditional and patriarchal family, liberal feminism, *The Great Indian Kitchen*

I. INTRODUCTION

Women have crossed numerous problems, obstacles, and barriers in their struggle to gain prominence as essential members of society. From the past, women have struggled as they do not have rights; they are isolated, neglected, and mistreated by the patriarchal system. However, women have dreams and wish to gain a respectable position in society rather than just as daughters, wives, and mothers. They want to evolve from the stereotypical existence and gain social, political, and economic rights and recognition. Despite the painful segregation and gender inequality, women stood up each time, and they were able to state and express their difficulties, feelings and requirements through women’s liberation movements. Women are also able to communicate the problems they endure in society, bring women’s issues to centre stage worldwide, and make people understand that women deserve equality in treatments, opportunities, respect and social rights. As Simone de Beauvoir notes,

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir, 1949)

Women are considered secondary with men in every aspect of their lives. The resultant suffering of women is also because of society’s social norms and moral codes that are disadvantageous to women. As a result, women’s dignity is at stake, but still, they stand on the same ground of intellectual and professional equality. Moreover, the spread of education paved the way for women to crave independence and self-reliance. Education and awareness have made women overcome the clouds of patriarchal society and its stereotypes. Nevertheless, women’s battle for equality is long and arduous against men’s age-old superiority and dominance. “Women were not recognized as individuals or autonomous beings...A man is right, being a man. The woman is in the wrong...” (Richards, 1981).

Harapriya Mohapatra elucidates that men subdued women, and women play the subservient role in the family as they have to toil for the family where men are the breadwinners. As women cannot do what they want, they need to seek permission from the men in the family as they do not have the freedom of choice. Therefore, women have an unbreakable monotonous pattern of life that revolves around every day. As Mohapatra quotes,

Women begin their day at the crack of dawn and take care of the entire family, send children to school, pack their husbands’ lunch. They have to perform their duties equivalent to their male counterparts. On returning home they have to complete all their household works and have to manage the same routine of the next day. The works they do at home are uncountable. This invisibilisation of women’s labour fails to get them their due weightage in the family. (Mohapatra, 2015)

Women need to be treated with respect and dignity; they should be provided with their freedom in the family. “Feminists have recognized the factor of gender differentiation as the root cause of women’s derogatory status in the hierarchical order of most of the societies”(Richards, 1981). Various academicians have analysed and studied the un verbalised scars of undignified women in society. They globalised the significance of the role of women, where men cannot supersede, and these ideas have been highlighted in several works of literature which have explored the tensions between culture and gender inequality. The media has also supported the enhancement of women in society through movies and short films. The selected movie for the present work is *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021); this Malayalam movie brilliantly captures the nuances of the patriarchal household horrors of women’s everyday lives. In an interview with BBC, the film’s director, Jeo Baby, explicates that, “It’s a universal story a woman’s struggle in the kitchen is the story of almost all women in India” (Baby, 2021). “Men think women are machines for making tea and washing clothes and raising kids” (Baby, 2021). The inspiration for *The Great Indian Kitchen*, came to him after he started to understand the difficulties in his own kitchen. “After I got married in 2015, I started spending a lot of time in the kitchen since I believe in gender equality. That’s when I realized that cooking involves a lot of heavy lifting” (Baby, 2021). He added that “I felt like I was trapped in a jail. And then I started thinking of all the women who can’t escape, and it troubled me” (Baby, 2021).

II. PLOT OVERVIEW

After growing up in Manama, Bahrain, an educated and progressive dancer (Nimisha Sajayan) marries a teacher (Suraj Venjaramood) from a highly traditional and patriarchal household. While the domestic home routine begins with the delightful pleasure of a new marriage, things quickly devolve. With all of its attendant annoyances, such as cleaning unclean containers, and leaking taps, the kitchen’s labour is left to the women, while the men prefer to spend their time on their phones or do yoga. In addition, her mother-in-law gives her husband, the father-in-law, the toothbrush to brush his teeth in the morning because the family is patriarchal. Their convenience and comfort constantly take precedence over their wife’s needs. While the new wife adjusts to her new surroundings and eventually comes to terms with them, her mother-in-law travels to look after her seven-month-pregnant daughter. She is solely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and other domestic duties. Her egocentric husband is unconcerned about her feelings and wants; instead, he only satisfies his pleasure.

Her father-in-law interdicts her from working, stating that having a woman in the house benefits the family. When she starts having periods, she is taken aback by her family’s antiquated views about menstruation. She is told to isolate herself in a room on the floor, bathe in the river, eat alone, and wash anything she encounters. She’s even been offered the option of staying with a relative or sleeping outside. While these events occur, Kerala is gripped by the Sabarimala temple decision, which found that menstruation is not an impurity and that women should be allowed to visit the shrine. The decision has enraged several people, including the bride’s family. All of these subtle injustices come to a peak one day, and the wife abandons her family in return for her independence and dignity, splashing dirty kitchen sink water on her husband and father-in-law. The film ends with a shot of her arriving in her vehicle as a self-employed dance teacher as her husband remarries, and the second wife seems to suffer the same fate as the first.

III. METHODOLOGY

The Concept of Feminism and Liberal Feminism

Women’s plight in the family, their inferior position, and lack of freedom has been topics of interest for quite a time. Men are the breadwinners, and women are bread-makers who have been confined in the kitchen for their whole life sacrificing their dreams and desires. This repression of women sooner became a revolution in feminism and the women’s liberation movement. Feminism is considered as a social movement that focuses on women’s experiences in their day-to-day life. Susan James details that, Feminism is an umbrella term that represents various forms of injustice against women. Feminists were committed to bringing justice for the injustices done to women. As Susan James quotes,

Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization, there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine or as implying an agreed political program. (James, 1998)

Feminist theory emerged through these feminist movements, which aimed for gender equality, the right to freedom and dealing with society’s power structures. Simone De Beauvoir illuminates that, “The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all human creatures nevertheless finds her living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.” (Beauvoir 1949) The theory reflects the power of education and eliminates the injustices women suffer in family and society. The status of women in India is a paradox as, on the one hand, they are at the peak of success, and on the other, they silently suffer violence afflicted by their family members. “India is a male-dominated society where women have been considered inferior to men in practical life” (Gupta, 2003).

Moreover, Gray & Boddy also mentions that women assume different roles in society besides the role in the family. “Feminism stands for a philosophy that seeks to bring gender equality by demonstrating the importance of women and

erase gender stereotypes that position men as superior and women as subordinate” (Gray & Boddy, 2010). This type of unvoiced suffering of women has led to women’s liberation, which ended up in Liberal Feminism.

Liberal Feminism stresses on sexual differences, unequal treatment and improving the status of women. Liberal feminists’ ideology is that women’s sexual subordination is a kind of injustice. They emphasize equal rights and liberties for women and men and moderating sexual differences; it is a widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminists. Liberal feminism maintains the tradition of liberalism, and its goal was to eradicate sexist norms. This stunted women’s moral development and denied them the self-fulfilment that comes only with the freedom to pursue their own good. “Liberal feminism is derived from the liberal political philosophy in the enlightenment period and centres on the core ideas of autonomy, universal rights, equal citizenship, and democracy” (Tong, 2009).

IV. FEATURES OF LIBERAL FEMINISM

Liberal Feminism ideologies are reflected in the field of Literature as various themes :

- Emphasis on the rights of individuals
- Equality of opportunity, particularly in education and work
- Concerned to demonstrate that the observable difference between sexes is not biological but a result of socialisation or sex role conditioning.
- Achieve gender equality and reduce women oppression and subordination

The movie’s plot links with the features of liberal feminism as it focuses on equality; as the daughter-in-law is deprived of her right to pursue her ambition when the protagonist receives her interview letter, her father-in-law disapproves. At the end of the movie, the daughter-in-law cannot tolerate it; furthermore, she leaves the house and finds her liberation to pursue her career and fulfil her dreams as liberal feminists argued that men and women are of equal human worth, the view that society as a whole would benefit from the contributions of women. Thompson enunciates, “It is women’s movement and liberation that is at stake. Women are harmed, oppressed and subordinated; women’s consciousness changed to see oppression for what it was and to see, too, that it was not inescapable or natural and that it could be challenged” (Thompson, 2001).

The protagonist suffers because of the indifferent attitude of her husband and father-in-law; there is no equal treatment, and she does not receive any respect; her toil in the kitchen is never-ending. Her denial of the right to pursue her career due to gender and the domination of the daughter-in-law comes under liberal feminism. Giddens defines liberal theory as a “feminist theory that believes gender inequality is created by lowering access for women and girls to civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and employment” (Giddens, 2001). “This situation is mainly centred on the socially constructed ideology of patriarchy that perpetuates inequality between the two sexes”(Bimer, 2018).

V. ANALYSIS

The Great Indian Kitchen: An Unsavoury Tale of Male Chauvinism at Home

It is said that the way to a man’s heart is through the stomach, but what about a woman’s heart? Jeo Baby’s latest movie, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), talks about the married woman’s life and her plight in the kitchen. “Cinema plays an essential role in shaping views about gender roles and gender identities within the Indian context where women are viewed as playing subordinate roles to men” (Bagchi, 1996; Ram 2002). The film begins with the montage where Nimisha Vijayan is happily dancing while on the other side, various snacks are prepared in a kitchen. The movie highlights multiple aspects of a family that glorify women as its backbone and independence and individuality beyond gender. The saying “one is not born, but becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1949) is applicable in this movie.

The movie has no violence and is portrayed subtly with no exaggeration so that the audience easily connects the happenings on the screen with their personal lives. The newly married woman’s life changes once the guests leave after the function as Nimisha’s life is all smiles and blushes, but as she sets foot in the marital life, things turn topsy-turvy. As the next day, when Nimisha and her mother-in-law start their day in the kitchen, they converse about the side dish for dosa as Nimisha says that “It will be either sambar or chutney in my home, not both” (*The Great Indian Kitchen*, 2021) to which her mother-in-law replies, “Here they want both, his dad wants the chutney hand ground. Every family has its practices, right?” (*The Great Indian Kitchen*, 2021). The hand-grounded chutney made by her mother-in-law is one example of the house’s patriarchy.

The mother-in-law is not the stereotypical harassing kind; instead, she is an ally to her daughter-in-law. Many moments are to be observed in the movie, as when the mother-in-law leaves to take care of her pregnant daughter, she seems to be wearing a salwar away from the gaze of her husband. There are several photographs of seemingly happy couples on the wall, but there is a sense of the patriarchal institution of the family behind it. As Shalini & Alamelu enshrine that, “The emergence of feminist movements has a major influence on breaking the barriers of subjugation of women in this patriarchal society” (Shalini & Alamelu 2019). Adding to the above statement, Walby explains the patriarchal concept by saying

I shall define patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women...the use of the term social structures is important here, since it clearly implies rejection both of biological

determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one (Walby, 1990)

The hurt and the suppressed anger of the wife are registered to her husband's cold-heartedness as he does not bother with her indignant feelings. The husband is a near mirror image of his father, who expects his wife to bring his toothbrush with a paste every morning while reading his newspaper, rests in the easy chair, and even waits for his wife to get his slippers when he goes out. It is a familiar sight in many households where men clutch their newspapers or scroll through their mobiles, whereas the women are in the kitchen making tea and snacks. HariPriya Mohapatra enshrines that, "Constitution gives equal importance to women's position and accorded equality to them. It is seen that where all citizens, irrespective of gender, are equal, women are clearly less equal than men. There exists high gender inequality in our country" (Mohapatra, 2015).

Interestingly, neither her father-in-law nor her husband is physically violent. When they disagree and put down the women, they do it with sweet smiles that make *The Great Indian Kitchen* different from other films of unhappy marriages. As there are no overt domestic violence or life and death issues yet, they drain the energy out of women. The movie powerfully reflects the plight of women in the kitchen and its hard-hitting take on the misogyny and chauvinism in families. The recurring shot in the film focuses on the hands of the women who endlessly cooks, grinds, clean, wipes, sweeps, and wash; the endless cycle is repeated as the viewer's feel the exhausted life of women in the kitchen. There is no background score in the film as the sound of women working in the kitchen is used, portraying the film's notion and men's self-well-being routine.

The Great Indian Kitchen has started the conversation of gender equality within homes. "Men know about gender equality, but it's not important in their own homes. Like most Indian men, my father, too, has double standards. I have heated arguments with him for being unfair to my mum. He's a modern progressive man, but at home, the burden of housework is borne completely by my mother" (Baby, 2021). This is what *The Great Indian Kitchen* wants to change in the family. Jeo Baby also added, "Women are living in jails created by men. Men are decision-makers, women are workers, and they don't even get paid for it." "The film's brilliance lay in the fact that it did not exaggerate, did not point fingers at anyone and showed us that the soft-spoken gentlemen could be the most toxic ones" (Baby, 2021).

While the women in the family bear the traditional family norms, the men get to bend the rules as it suits them as it's too difficult for them to eat cow dung to be purified, so it's enough if he takes a dip in the river. Without pulling punches or compromise, the director makes his protagonist break free from the shackles. The husband and wife in *The Great Indian Kitchen* get their happy ending respectively as the wife is now a successful dance teacher who was once asked not to go for a job by her father-in-law. Whereas the husband remarries, the second wife's fate is like the firsts as viewers' witness the never-ending cycle begins.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Great Indian Kitchen is the voice of the voiceless, the unsung hurdles, the silent cries of every woman, and an endless cycle for a lifetime of women in the kitchen. Many viewers relate to the film and the women's plight in the patriarchal family and society. "Women give their best to their family to keep them blissful and fulfil all their requirements; but the members of the family fail to identify their worth" (Shalini & Alamelu, 2018). The film's triumph is that it made some men squirm as many men felt guilty watching the movie, and it was an eye-opener for many men. As Jeo Bay said, "Through the film, I want to tell women that you must get out of this trap, why continue to suffer? This is also your world to enjoy" (Baby, 2021). The protagonist walks out as she no longer can bear the family's patriarchal and traditional aspects. She takes her liberty not to voice out her suffering instead show it through her action by walking out. The film is an eye-opener to many women who are still judged for their cooking skills and talks about the new generation of women who question such unsung slavery and a tribute to women who are still silently managing it inside every home for years. This movie sets an example for Liberal Feminism as she walks out and luxuriates in the joy of liberty.

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